

**Commencement Address
The Ohio State University
Professor Deborah A. Ballam
December 11, 2005**

Thank you President Holbrook. I also want to thank all of the 8,000 plus students who have blessed me with their presence in my classroom during my 24 years of teaching at this wonderful institution, The Ohio State University. I dedicate my remarks today to my students.

You, our students, are the most phenomenal, special people in the world.

The remarkable anthropologist, Margaret Mead, penned my favorite quote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever does." You may not think you have changed the world during your time at Ohio State, but I know you have. And, that is what makes you so very special.

When I think about the many ways in which students have changed the world, I think immediately of Chuck. Chuck was my student two years ago. Chuck was not in school last year because he was serving a tour of duty in Iraq. He also was not here three years ago because he was serving a tour of duty in Afghanistan. Chuck is now back at Ohio State and will graduate next year.

Our student newspaper, The Lantern, carried a story a few weeks ago about another one of our students named Steven who, like Chuck, had been called to both Afghanistan and Iraq. Steven told the Lantern reporter, serving in Iraq "was the scariest thing I ever went through in my life; I sometimes wake up during thunderstorms. I still sometimes watch the side of the road."

Another student who served in Iraq, Joshua, told the reporter "Stuff happens every day that you'd like to see not happen—car bombs, mortar attacks. Someone dies quite often, if not every day. . . but the job required soldiers to quickly overcome their fears. If you ducked down every time you heard a mortar round or bullet flying over your head, you'd never get anything done."

Chuck, Steven, and Joshua, represent our many young men and women from Ohio State who have served, and some of whom have died, in war. These--our children, our students, our youth--have experienced things that no human should have to experience. They have seen things that no human should have to see. Their lives have been altered forever. And, they have done it for us.

I would like all of those among our graduates who are veterans or have served, or currently are serving in, the Reserves, the National Guard, and ROTC to stand and remain standing for a few moments.

I am here to tell you today that you have changed the world and you most certainly will continue to do so. Regardless of what anyone thinks about the politics of these endeavors, and regardless of whether you have been on active duty, you have changed our world because of what you represent. You represent courage, you represent commitment, you represent what is best about human beings being willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to help other human beings. You change the world just because of the kinds of people you are. You are role models for all of us in how to live our lives.

Thank you. Please be seated.

When I think of the many ways in which you have changed the world, I think of all of you who have chosen to become teachers. In a recent Newsweek article, Anna Quindlen described teachers as “the gardeners of the landscape of the human race.” Teachers change the world—often one person at a time—on a daily basis.

Who among us here today has not had a teacher who had a profound effect on their lives? My student Keisha wrote the following about her kindergarten teacher. “Many people affected me in ways they will never know. One example that is constantly in the back of my mind is my kindergarten teacher who took me outside the classroom at the end of the year and gave me a book, ‘Flippy Frog Goes to School.’ She told me I was a smart girl. Although this was a very simple gesture and something I am sure she doesn’t remember, it gave me the confidence I needed to aim for excellence in academics. Thus, I came to Ohio State understanding that small things can make a big difference and that I had a responsibility to make a difference.” Keisha graduated a few years ago and is now a successful executive with Procter & Gamble. Yet, this moment with her kindergarten teacher was a defining moment in her life.

Many of you, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, from many of our colleges, have been or are planning to become teachers. Even though some of you may not yet have taught, many of you have at least student taught or worked in some way in our schools. And, of course, we have our wonderful graduate students many of whom have served as teachers during their years at Ohio State. Will all of you who have been, are, or are planning to be, teachers of any kind please stand and remain standing for a few moments.

I am here today to tell you that you have changed the world and that you most certainly will continue to do so. You represent dedication, you represent commitment, you represent what is best about human beings

willing to dedicate their lives to helping other human beings. You are role models for all of us in how to live our lives.

Thank you. Please be seated.

When I think about the ways in which you have changed the world, I think about those I call our “firsts”.

Some of you are the first in your families to attend college. I can always tell who you are—just look for the ones who are strong as steel and determined to succeed for you carry the hopes and dreams of your families on your backs. My student Angel wrote, “I have humble beginnings. My parents were high school educated people from the deep south. No matter how successful I become, no matter where I go, I will never forget from whence I came.”

When I think of students who are “firsts” I think of those of you who are first generation Americans, navigating among two cultures, proud of the first and committed to the second who greatly enrich us with the wonderful diversity you bring to our world. Tahira, whose parents immigrated from Pakistan and are strict Muslims, wrote: “having two cultures is difficult, but also a strong part of modern society. . . . In the process of balancing my two worlds, I get to educate and learn from others around me, adding to the diversity of our community.” Tahira lives the true meaning of the American melting pot.

When I think of students who are “firsts” I think of the many international students who are the first to attend college in this country. You come here knowing your visits home will be few and far between, if at all. Yihua, who is from China, wrote “you are forced to become a stronger person because you have no one to cry to.” But, Yihua loved her experience at Ohio State and in this country. “On our campus I made friends,” she told me, “from all over the world. Frequently, the American students saw me as the source of all knowledge about China and I feel by sharing my culture with others, as they shared theirs with me, we were doing something great and meaningful. I realize how mind-opening my experience was and how lucky I was to be in such a diverse and open society.” Yihua lives the true meaning of the American melting pot.

We also have among us others who faced similar challenges to our firsts. I know that some of you during your student years worked 30 or 40 hours per week. I know that many of you are older than the typical 18-22 year old college student. You often have to work so many hours that you cannot participate in social activities or community service. You often come to class dead tired after having worked the night shift or after having stayed up all night with a sick child. But, you had no choice. You had to work. As my student Amar wrote, “Each day meant hoping that the used car would

start in the freezing cold so I could make it to the job in between my classes to earn my keep.” Another student, Carol, who had six children, wrote that “For the last two years I was in college I didn’t even go to bed on Sunday nights.”

You may not think the rest of us noticed, but you would be wrong. Your classmates noticed. My student Ann wrote, “I personally didn’t have to support myself in college. But, watching my roommate Beth work at the Mirror Lake Café for 30 hours per week just to be able to pay her rent and living expenses made me admire all students like her.” Your children noticed. Carol’s six children wrote the following to me about their mother’s college days: “Our mother is an amazing person. What we learned from her is that no matter how hard the journey, the destination is worth it. The road she chose to walk was not easy but she did it for us.”

Will all of you “firsts” –first generation to attend college, first generation Americans, international students, and all non-traditional age students, and students who worked many hours per week-- please stand and remain standing for a few moments.

I am here today to tell you that you have changed the world and will continue to do so just by being who you are. You represent strength, you represent determination, you represent commitment. You serve as an inspiration to all of us. You are role models for all of us in how to live our lives.

Thank you. Please be seated.

When I think of the many ways in which you have changed the world, I think of all of you who have spent countless hours during your years at Ohio State volunteering in community service activities. Some among you have gone on Alternative Spring Break trips where you travel to both urban and rural areas of the country to contribute your spring break week to things like working in domestic violence shelters, food pantries, at Head Start programs, and delivering meals to people with AIDS.

Just a year and a half ago, you built a Habitat for Humanity house on the lawn behind the Ohio Union. When completed the house was moved to its permanent location a few blocks away from campus. And, when I say you built this house, you know I don’t mean you just showed up and hammered a few nails. You first raised over \$120,000 to pay for the house. You then organized shift after shift of hundreds of students from all over campus to build the house from scratch.

Talk about changing lives! The family that lives in the house used to live out on park benches.

And, this is not the only Habitat house that you have helped build. Just last month, a large group of you traveled to Slidell, Louisiana to help

with the rebuilding efforts in the area ravaged by Hurricane Katrina. You worked at 12 different Habitat sites using chain saws to clear trees, loading concrete, doing electrical work, and removing walls. In fact, you routinely devote time to building Habitat houses all over the central Ohio community. Think of all the families that now have a place to call home and all because of you!!!!

I think of the hundreds and hundreds of you who each year volunteer in our local schools as reading tutors, math tutors, chess coaches, as Big Brothers and Big Sisters. This is incredibly important work the impact of which will extend for generations. As my student Frank wrote about his volunteer activities with 3rd and 4th graders in the Columbus public schools, "It became clear to me that the most important thing about community service is not always what you do, but that you do it. The more college students these 3rd and 4th graders meet, the less out of reach an Ohio State education seems to them."

A group of you travel to Honduras each spring to work on various projects designed to improve the standard of living in that country. On a recent trip, for example, you worked on the wiring for an entire air conditioning system for an orphanage in that country.

When I think of the ways you change the world I think of our students who each year sponsor a Hog Roast to raise money for St. John's Center and Community Kitchen and an annual Thanksgiving dinner which raises money for the Mid-Ohio Food Bank; I think of our professional students who donate many hours in free clinics in our community.

And, you don't just change lives in the Columbus area. Our students from the Marion campus serve as mentors for elementary and middle school students; students from our Newark campus volunteer for Project STRIVE (Serving Together Responsibly in Volunteer Efforts) to seek out and respond to the social and economic needs of the community; students at the Mansfield campus partner with 44 nonprofit agencies and organizations to do community service; and, our students from the Lima campus organize blood drives four times per year.

Do not ever underestimate how these activities change the world. As my student Lindsey wrote, "I know I changed the world. Maybe all I did was give cancer patients a fun afternoon with friends and keep a homeless man's hands warm with mittens. But, to those few people, I changed their worlds."

When I think of the ways in which you change the world, I think of how many of you during your years at Ohio State devote part of your volunteer activity to work tirelessly in support of various social justice and human rights causes. In doing so, you educate all of us and make this a

better world. On the Columbus campus alone we have over 100 registered student organizations at Ohio State devoted in some way to advancing the cause of social justice and human rights. You work on equal rights and social justice on behalf of all of our racial and ethnic groups, on behalf of people with disabilities, on behalf of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights, of women's rights, children's rights, for people living in poverty, and environmental causes.

Will all of you graduates who have done any volunteer work or have worked with any social justice or human rights causes of any kind during your years at Ohio State please stand and remain standing for a few moments.

Talk about changing the world!

I am here today to tell you that you have changed the world. You represent the best that Ohio State has to offer. You represent selflessness. You represent the human spirit. You serve as an inspiration to all of us. You are role models for all of us in how to live our lives.

Thank you.

At this time I would like to ask all of our graduates to stand and remain standing. Many of you have stood up a number of times today. But, even if this is the first time you have stood up today, you too have changed the world during your years at Ohio State. You may have done something as simple as take care of a sick roommate. Or, you may have helped a classmate through a personal tragedy. You may have taken care of each other after the tragic fire we had a few years ago. You may not have thought you were changing the world, but you were. You may never know the way in which your actions, no matter how small, affect others, but rest assured they do have an affect.

Thank you. Please be seated.

We all create the world in which we live and we all change it on a daily basis. Think of the collective power we all have! You fully understand that collective power as you have illustrated by all of the fantastic ways in which you already have contributed to making this a better world for all. However, once you graduate and enter the working world and start your families, it will become increasingly difficult to sustain the power.

My generation, the 60s generation, in spite of all of our good intentions, was not able to sustain our power. We were thoroughly intent on saving the world. And, during our student years, as during your student years, we very much were engaged in activities that were not focused just on our individual well being, but on the betterment of the world. We did many of the things you do—we volunteered in schools and we worked on poverty issues. My generation is now in the stage of our lives where we are

beginning to think about the legacies we have left. As I think about the legacy of my generation, we did not fulfill our promise. For example, in spite of our resolve during our student years to change the world, today 1 in 6 children in this country—not in some third world country—in this country—live in poverty. This has not changed significantly in the last 30 years. And, today the percent of homeless people is higher than ever.

We didn't intentionally forget our power. One of my students, Rohini, who graduated two years ago, wrote to me "Thinking back to my student days, I feel like I contributed more as a student to better society than I have since I graduated and became a working person. I feel like my impact as a student was much greater and far more visible than it has been since I started working." The university culture, both then and now, includes a shared vision of working for the collective good. Most of the systems in which you will be existing, like those we moved into upon graduation, and the one that Rohini moved into upon graduation, do not have such a shared vision.

Without that shared vision, we are simply unable to sustain our commitment to the larger society and we became engrossed in taking care of ourselves and our families. Part of your challenge, indeed part of the challenge of all of us in this arena today and in the world, is to return to our communities and seek out, empower, and support change agents, like all of our wonderful students here today, so that it will be possible for this generation to sustain their commitment to the world.

You know what is important—keep that in your hearts forever. And, never, never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. It is, indeed, the only thing that ever will.

You are phenomenal human beings. You have my deepest respect. You have our deepest gratitude. You honor us by being part of our community. We are so enormously grateful that you have blessed us by choosing to spend part of your life's journey at Ohio State.

In closing, I am going to borrow something I heard in another speech a couple of years ago.

I will quote, as did the speaker I heard, the esteemed, modern philosopher, Rod Stewart, when I say to my dear students who have shared my classrooms for the last 24 years, you're in my heart, you're in my soul and I will love you forever. And, to all of you graduates, I know I speak for all of the faculty and staff at this great university when I tell you, you all are in our hearts, you're in our souls, and we will love you forever.

Congratulations on this glorious day and thank you for sharing it with me.